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Transcribed from the [1922] Methuen and Co./Jarrold and Sons edition by David Price, email ccx074@pglaf.org

FOR LOVE OF THE KING

A BURMESE MASQUE

BY

OSCAR WILDE

METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published by Methuen & Co. Ltd. in 1922

This Edition on handmade paper is limited to 1000 copies

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The very interesting and richly coloured masque or pantomimic play which is here printed in book form for the first time, was invented sometime in 1894 or possibly a little earlier. It was written, not for publication, but as a personal gift to the author's friend and friend of his family, Mrs. Chan Toon, and was sent to her with the letter that follows and explains its origin.

Mrs. Chan Toon, before her marriage to Mr. Chan Toon, a Burmese gentleman, nephew of the King of Burma and a barrister of the Middle Temple, was Miss Mabel Cosgrove, the daughter of Mr. Ernest Cosgrove of Lancaster Gate, a friend of Sir William and Lady Wilde, and herself brought up with Oscar and his brother Willie.

For a long while Mrs. Chan Toon, who after her husband's death became Mrs. Woodhouse-Pearse, refused to permit the masque to be printed. The late Robert Ross much wanted to include it in an edition of Wilde's works, of which it now forms a part, but he could not obtain its owner's consent. An arrangement, however, having been completed, the play is now made public.

TITE STREET, CHELSEA,
November 27, 1894

My dear Mrs. Chan Toon,

I am greatly repentant being so long in acknowledging receipt of "*Told on the Pagoda*." *I enjoyed reading the stories*, *and much admired their quaint and delicate charm. Burmah calls to me*.

Under another cover I am sending you a fairy play entitled "*For Love of the King*," *just for your own amusement. It is the outcome of long and luminous talks with your distinguished husband in the Temple and on the river*, *in the days when I was meditating writing a novel as beautiful and as intricate as a Persian praying-rug. I hope that I have caught the atmosphere*.

I should like to see it acted in your Garden House on some night when the sky is a sheet of violet and the stars like women's eyes. Alas, *it is not likely*.

I am in the throes of a new comedy. I met a perfectly wonderful person the other day who unconsciously has irradiated my present with sinuous suggestion: a Swedish Baron, French in manner, Athenian in mind, and Oriental in morals. His society is a series of revelations. . . .

I was at Oakley Street on Thursday; my mother tells me she sends you a letter nearly every week.

Constance desires to be warmly remembered, while I, who am bathing my brow in the perfume of water-lilies, lay myself at the feet of you and yours.

OSCAR WILDE

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS OF THE PLAY

KING MENG BENG (*Lord of a Thousand White Elephants*, *Countless Umbrellas and other attributes of greatness*).

U. RAI GYAN THOO (*A Prime Minister*).

SHAH MAH PHRU (*A Girl*, *half Italian*, *half Burmese*, *of dazzling beauty*).

DHAMMATHAT (*Legal Adviser to the Court*).

HIP LOONG (*A Chinese Wizard of great repute*).

MOUNG PHO MHIN (*Minister of Finance*).

TWO ENVOYS FROM THE KING OF CEYLON.

NOBLES, COURTIERS, SOOTHSAYERS, POONYGEES, DANCING GIRLS, BETEL-NUT CARRIERS, UMBRELLA BEARERS, FOLLOWERS, SERVANTS, SLAVES, amongst whom are several CHINESE but no INDIANS.

TIME: *The Sixteenth Century*.

ACT I

SCENE I

The palace of the KING OF BURMAH. *The scene is laid in the Hall of a Hundred Doors. In the distance can be seen the moat, the waiting elephants, and the peacocks promenading proudly in the blinding sunshine of late afternoon. The scene discovers* KING MENG BENG *seated on a raised cushion sewn with rubies, under a canopy supported by four attendants, motionless as bronze figures. By his side is a betel-nut box, glittering with gems. On either side of him, but much lower down, are the* TWO AMBASSADORS OF THE KING OF CEYLON, *bearers of the King of Ceylon's consent to the marriage of his only daughter to Meng Beng in two years' time, men of grave, majestic mien, clad in flowing robes almost monastic in their white simplicity. They smoke gravely at the invitation of* MENG BENG.

Round about are grouped the courtiers, the poonygees, and the kneeling servants, while in the background wait the dancing girls. Banners, propelled with a measured rhythm, create an agreeable breeze. On a great table of gold stand goblets of gold and heaped-up fruits. Everywhere will be observed the emblems of the Royal Peacock and the Sacred White Elephant. Burmese musical instruments sound an abrupt but charming discord. The poinsettias flower punctuates points of deepest colour from out of vases fashioned like the lotus. Orchids are everywhere. The indescribable scent of Burmah steals across the footlights. The glow, the colour, the sun-swept vista sweeps across the senses. THE KING *claps his hands. The* DANCING GIRLS, *at the signal, advance. They are clad in dresses made of fish scales, which are fastened with diamonds and pale emeralds, to imitate the upthrown spray on the crest of a wave. The dance concluded, the* CINGALESE AMBASSADORS *rise and prepare to take ceremonious leave of* THE KING, *who hands to them, through his* VIZIER, *his message to His Majesty of Ceylon, inscribed on palm leaves and enclosed in a bejewelled casket.*

Many flowery speeches pass. Exit (*L.*), *walking backwards.*

THE KING *expresses a desire for rest before starting by the Moon of Taboung* [4] *for the Pagoda of Golden Flowers.*

Exit MENG BENG (*C.*), *an alcove of satin hangings which commands a view of the great hall.*

The Crowd break up into groups. U. RAI GYAN THOO *and* MOUNG PHO MHIN *converse on the tendency of the King to interference in affairs of State; his extreme youth and delicacy of temperament; the pity that the marriage is to be so long delayed; the necessity to find him some distraction in the meantime.*

Suddenly the tom-toms sound loudly. There is much movement. The moon rises over the sea. Torches flare as the attendants move to and fro in the gardens beyond.

The White Elephant of the King, with its trappings of gold, is led to the entrance where, at a word, it sinks obediently to the ground.

THE KING *appears. He has changed his gay apple-green dress to one of more sombre hue. He enters the howdah—the elephant rises—the procession starts. It consists of not fewer than two hundred persons, keeping in view of the audience until lost by a bend in the avenue.*

SCENE II

THE PAGODA OF GOLDEN FLOWERS

Midnight

Surrounded by Peepul-trees, the great Htee, [6] *with its crown of a myriad jewels, rises towards the violet, star-studded sky, its golden bells tinkling in a soft night-wind.*

When the curtain rises, the circular platform is deserted. Statues of Buddha seated and recumbent fill the numberless niches in the wall, and before each burn long candles; heaped-up pink roses and japonica on brass trays are lit from above by swinging coloured lamps. At intervals are stalls laden with fruit and cheroots. All is mysterious, solemn, beautiful.

A deep Burmese gong tolls. People emerge from the four staircases that lead up to the platform. Men, women, and children, all in gala attire. The young people conversing, gesticulating, smiling. The older people, more subdued, carry beads and votive offering to Buddha. Charming Burmese girls, with huge cigars, meet and greet handsome Burmese men smoking cheroots and wearing flowers in their ears. Children play silently with coloured balls. In the corners, under canopies, are seated fortune-tellers, busy casting horoscopes. It is a veritable riot of colour, with never a discordant note.

Through the crowd THE KING *passes alone and unrecognised, and disappears through double doors of heavily carved teak wood. He has hardly passed when* MAH PHRU, *a very lovely girl, enters in distress. She whispers that she desires an audience of the King who has come amongst them. The few who hear her shrug their shoulders, smile, and pass on. They are incredulous. She goes from group to group, but the people turn from her with disdain. Then the great doors open, and* THE KING *is seen. The girl throws herself, Oriental fashion, in his path. Her beauty and her pathos arrest his attention and he waves aside those who would interfere. She implores* THE KING'S *protection. She is willing to be his slave. He listens with deep attention. She explains that since her father's death she has been continuously persecuted by the village people on the double count of her Italian blood and her poverty.*

The girl invites him to come to her hut in the forest and verify what she says. With a gesture he signifies that he will follow where she leads. She rises. The crowd gathers round—all are hushed to silence. THE KING, *as one entranced, puts aside all who would in any way interfere. The girl precedes him, going from the Pagoda towards the night. When she reaches the great staircase, she beckons, Oriental fashion, with downward hand. The scene should, in grouping and colour, make for rare beauty.*

SCENE III

A humble dhunni-thatched hut, set amidst the whispering grandeur of the jungle, with its mighty trees, its trackless paths, its indescribable silence. The curtain discovers MAH PHRU *and* THE KING, *who expresses his amazement at the loneliness and the poverty of her lot. She explains that poverty is not what frightens her, but the enmity of those who live yonder, and who make it almost impossible for her to sell her cucumbers or her pineapples.* THE KING'S *gaze never leaves the face or figure of the girl. He declares that he will protect her—that he will build her a home here in the shadow of the loneliness around them. He has two years of an unfettered freedom—for those years he can command his life. He loves her, he desires her—they will find a Paradise together. The girl trembles with joy—with fear—with surprise.* "And after two years?" *she asks.* "Death," *he answers.*

ACT II

SCENE I

The jungle once more. Time: noonday. In place of the hut is a building, half Burmese, half Italian villa, of white Chunam, with curled roofs rising on roofs, gilded and adorned with spiral carvings and a myriad golden and jewel-encrusted bells. On the broad verandahs are thrown Eastern carpets, rugs, embroideries.

The world is sun-soaked. The surrounding trees stand sentinel-like in the burning light. Burmese servants squat motionless, smoking on the broad white steps that lead from the house to the garden. The crows croak drowsily at intervals. Parrots scream intermittently. The sound of a guitar playing a Venetian love-song can be heard coming from the interior. Otherwise life apparently sleeps. Two elderly retainers break the silence.

"When will the Thakin tire of this?" *one asks the other in kindly contempt.*

"The end is already at hand. I read it at dawn to-day."

"Whence will it come?"

"I know not. It is written that one heart will break."

"He will leave her?"

"He will leave her. He will have no choice—who can war with Fate?"

The sun shifts a little; a light breeze kisses the motionless palm leaves—they quiver gracefully. Attendants appear R. and L. bearing a great Shamiana (tent), silver poles, carved chairs, foot supports, fruit, flowers, embroidered fans. Three musicians in semi-Venetian-Burmese costume follow with their instruments. The tent erected, enter (C.) MENG BENG *and* MAH PHRU, *followed by two Burmese women carrying two tiny children in Burmese fashion on their hips.*

The servants retire to a distance. MENG BENG *and* MAH PHRU *seat themselves on carven chairs; the children are placed at their feet and given coloured glass balls to*

play with. MENG BENG *and* MAH PHRU *gaze at them with deep affection and then at each other*.

The musicians play light, *zephyr-like airs*. MENG BENG *and* MAH PHRU *talk together*. MENG BENG *smokes a cigar*, MAH PHRU *has one of the big yellow cheroots affected by Burmese women to-day*.

"It wants but two days to the two years," *he tells her sadly*.

"And you are happy?"

"As a god."

She smiles radiantly. *She suspects nothing*. *She is more beautiful than before*. *Her dress is of the richest Mandalay silks*. *She wears big nadoungs of rubies in her ears*.

Presently MENG BENG *arranges a set of ivory chessmen on a low table between them*. *The sun sinks slowly*. *The sound of approaching wheels is heard*.

Enter (*C.*) U. RAI GYAN THOO, *preceded by two servants*. MENG BENG *looks up in surprise—in alarm*. *He rises*, *etc.*, *and goes forward*. U. RAI GYAN THOO *presents a letter written on palm leaves*. MENG BENG *does not open it*.

The curtains at the opening of the tent are, *Oriental fashion*, *dropped*. *The music ceases*.

MENG BENG *and the* GRAND VIZIER *converse apart*. *The Minister explains that the Princess of Ceylon's ship and its great convoy have already been sighted*. *The Court and city wait in eager expectancy*. *The King has worshipped long enough at the Pagoda of Golden Flowers—his subjects and his bride call to him*. U. RAI GYAN THOO *has come to take him to them*.

MENG BENG *is terribly distressed*.

"You can return one day," *the Vizier tells him*. "The Pagoda will remain. I also, once, in years long dead, Lord of the Sea and Moon, worshipped at a Pagoda."

MENG BENG *seeks* MAH PHRU *to explain that he goes on urgent affairs*, *that he will come back to her and to his sons*, *perhaps before the waning of the new moon*. *Their parting is sad with the pensive sadness of look and gesture peculiar to Eastern people*.

MENG BENG *goes* (C.) *with* U. RAI GYAN THOO. MAH PHRU *mounts to the verandah to watch them go from behind the curtains*. *Then*, *slowly sinking across the heaped-up cushions*, *she faints*.

The sun has set. The music ceases. The melancholy cry of the peacocks fills the silence.

ACT DROP

ACT III

SCENE I

Seven years have elapsed.

The same scene.

Curtain discovers MAH PHRU *seated on a high verandah. A clearance has been made in the surrounding trees to give a full view of the road beyond. She is watching, always watching. With her are two beautiful little boys.*

"To-day, perhaps," *she murmurs*. "Perhaps to-morrow; but without fail—one day."

"Look!" *she cries*. "At last my lord returns!"

Coming up the jungle road, in view of the audience, are a bevy of horsemen.

MAH PHRU, *wondering, descends to greet them. Enter* U. RAI GYAN THOO. *He is dressed all in white, which is Burmese mourning.* MAH PHRU *sinks back—she fears the worst. The old man reassures her. He tells her that* MENG BENG *has sent for his sons—that the Queen is dead, and there is no heir.*

"Queen? What Queen?" *demands* MAH PHRU.

"The Queen of Burmah."

So MAH PHRU *learns for the first time that her lover is the ruler of the country, supreme master of and dictator to everyone.*

Weeping, but not daring to disobey, she summons the children to her; then, sinking on her knees, entreats in moving and pathetic words to be permitted to go with them, in the lowest most menial capacity. U. RAI GYAN THOO *refuses. There is no place for her in the greatness of the world yonder.* "Even Kings forget," *he says*. "It is the command of the supreme Lord of the Earth and of the Sky that she remain where she is."

Then he orders his followers to make the necessary arrangements for the safe journey of their future king and his brother.

The children stand passive in their gay dress, but are bewildered and afraid.

MAH PHRU *has risen to her feet. She appears as if turned to bronze—a model of restraint and dignity, blent with colour and beauty and infinite grace.*

THE CURTAIN DESCENDS SLOWLY

SCENE II

The same night.

The home of the Chinese Wizard, HIP LOONG, *by the river—a place fitted with Chinese things: Dragons of gold with eyes of jade gleaming from out dim corners, Buddhas of gigantic size fashioned of priceless metals with heads that move, swinging banners with fringes of many-coloured stones, lanterns with glass slides on which are painted grotesque figures. The air is full of the scent of joss sticks. The Wizard reclines on a divan, inhaling opium slowly, clothed with the subdued gorgeousness of China—blue and tomato-red predominate. He has the appearance of a wrinkled walnut. His forehead is a lattice-work of wrinkles. His pigtail, braided with red, is twisted round his head. His hands are as claws. The effect is weird, unearthly.*

Enter MAH PHRU.

The Wizard silently motions her to some piled-up cushions at a little distance. He listens to what she tells him. He appears unmoved, at a recital apparently full of tragedy. Only the eyes of the dragons move, and the heads of the Buddhas go slowly like pendulums. When she has finished speaking, HIP LOONG *makes reply.*

"This is how passion always ends. I have lived for a thousand years; and on this planet it is ever the same."

MAH PHRU *is not listening.*

"How can I go to my children?" *she demands, once again.*

"I can turn you into a bird," *the Wizard says.* "You can fly to the palace and walk and watch ever on that terrace in the rose gardens above the sea."

"What bird?" *she asks, trembling.*

"You shall have the form of the white paddy bird, because, though a woman and foolish as women ever are, you are very pure ivory. O! daughter of man and of love."

To this MAH PHRU *dissents. She paces the long room.*

"Transform me into a peacock; they are more beautiful."

The Wizard, leaning on his elbow, smiles, and the smile is a revelation of a mocking comprehension.

"So be it." *He bows his head.*

The lights fade one by one.

CURTAIN

SCENE III

The Gardens of the Palace of the King.

Time: late afternoon.

Colonnades of roses stretch away on every side. Fountains play, throwing a shower on water-lilies of monstrous size. Peacocks walk with stately tread across the green turf. Only one, larger and more beautiful than the rest, is perched alone, with drooping head and folded tail, on the broad-pillared terrace that overhangs the sea. The scene is aglow with light and colour, yet holds a shadowed silence.

Enter some courtiers, who converse in perturbed fashion as they go towards the Palace.

Enter MOUNG PHO MHIN *and* U. RAI GYAN THOO, *accompanied by the Court Physicians and Astrologers.*

"The King cannot live beyond the night," *the Physicians say. The sudden, mysterious illness that has attacked him defies their skill.*

The Astrologers declare that the stars in their courses fight against his recovery; unless a miracle should happen, the new day will see him dead.

The Ministers regard each other in consternation; then walk the terrace with bent heads.

The peacock on the wall spreads its tail and utters a melancholy cry of poignant pain.

The listeners start in superstitious horror.

The peacock folds its tail and resumes its meditations.

"That bird is not as other birds," *one astrologer declares*. "I have watched it for years past—it is ever alone—the others all avoid it. I think it has a soul."

"You mistake," *replies his colleague*; "it is but an evil Nat. [32] Observe its eyes: they are not those of a bird; they are those of a spirit in prison."

They pass on in the wake of the ministers.

The peacock closes its eyes.

Enter the two young PRINCES, *accompanied by two great Pegu hounds. They converse in subdued tones, strolling slowly. They are followed by pages of honour, carrying grain, which the young men proceed to distribute amongst the birds as they rapidly approach them. The peacock on the wall never stirs; she watches the young men always. Then the elder one comes with a handful of food and proffers it, but the peacock does not eat*.

"I shall never understand you, Queen of the Kingdom of Birds," *he says, and strokes her feathers. At his touch the plumage scintillates with a brighter, a more exquisite sheen*.

He murmurs to the bird in soft tones and mythical words. He tells it that the fear of everyone is that the King is mortally stricken, for he lies yonder in most strange and evil agony; that the hearts of himself and his brother are numb with the sorrow that knows no language. The bird listens eagerly. And if the King should go, he, the speaker, will reign in his stead. The prospect fills him with fear. He desires, as also his brother, if the King must die, to return to dwell in the forest with the mother who he knows awaits them there.

The peacock spreads its wings as if for flight, then crouches down once more, and over it watches the young prince.

The sun envelops them both in a sudden shaft of rose and purple and gold. A servant descends and comes across the grass. He shikoes profoundly to the two young men, lifting up his hands in the deepest reverence of Burmah.

"The Lord of the Earth and the Sky desires his sons; he nears the Great Unknown."

CURTAIN

SCENE IV

The retreat of HIP LOONG, *the Wizard*.

Time: *the same night*.

The curtain discovers MAH PHRU, *who has returned to human form*, *and the Wizard together*.

He tells her that he has restored her to her former state only because she has implored him to do so; *that her life is measured by hours as a consequence of such insensate folly in breaking the vow of five years back*.

"But the King will live," *she murmurs*.

"The King will live. He will find happiness with someone fairer than you. That is well. Your life for his. It is the price."

"The price is nothing. Have I not looked on my heart's beloved one for five years—looked on his face—heard his voice—trembled with joy at his footsteps? Have I not waited and watched? Have I not gazed on my sons and seen their royal bearing, and known their touch?"

"You are, then, content?"

"You are a Wizard—you can read that I am."

"It is not I that am a Wizard—it is Love. That is the only Wizard this world knows."

CURTAIN

SCENE V

The bed-chamber of the King—vast and shadowy. *On heaped-up cushions and covers of yellow and blue*, *under a pearl-sewn creamy velvet baldaquin*, *embroidered with peacocks*, *lies* MENG BENG, *mortally stricken*; *his face bears the ashen pallor that only dark skins know*. *The ministers*, *the servants*, *the courtiers*, *the countless motley gathering of an Eastern Court are scattered in anxious groups*, *watching*, *waiting*, *murmuring*. *Only the space near the couch is clear*. *Without*, *the dawn breaks over the sea*, *and*, *stealing through the opening*, *makes the great chamber flush till it looks like porphyry*.

The tolling of a deep gong and the voices of a myriad birds invade the throbbing silence of the Palace.

"He passes," *murmur the physicians*. *Everyone's gaze turns to the dying man*.

"Yet his star is in the ascendant," *say the astrologers*. *The risen sun touches him with its light like a caress*. *He opens his eyes*. *His sons advance*. *They raise him high on*

his cushions and give a restorative. The end has come. Suddenly he rallies slightly.

The doors at the far end are rudely opened. A woman, young and lovely, advances, thrusting roughly aside the many hands stretched out to bar her path.

She reaches the King.

"I bring you life, Star of my Soul," *she cries*, "I bring you life," *and so saying, falls dead at his feet.*

The Courtiers rush forward.

The King rises.

He stands erect.

The sun lies like a golden benediction over all.

Jewels glitter.

The whole world of birds sing.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Footnotes:

[4] One of the greatest feasts of the Buddhist year.

[6] Spire.

[32] Fairy.